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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ANKARA 006106

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2025

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: COMBATING EXTREMISM

REF: A. STATE 159129

[1](#)B. ANKARA 002030

[1](#)C. ANKARA 005496

[1](#)D. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

[1](#)E. ANKARA 005281

[1](#)F. ANKARA 001551

[1](#)G. ANKARA 001935

[1](#)H. ANKARA 005632

Classified By: A/DCM Thomas Goldberger; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Turkey has a reputation for being a moderate, secular, and democratic country with a Muslim population. The reality of Islam in Turkey, however, is more complicated. The State actively represses unofficial expressions of Islam. Violent Turkish Islamic extremism does exist. Mission Turkey does not direct our contact efforts toward "extremists" specifically, but we are widening our circle of Islam-oriented contacts and seeing results. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) This cable is in response to Ref A.

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HOW MODERATE IS TURKISH ISLAM?  
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[1](#)3. (C) Turkey has the reputation of being the home of "moderate Islam" because it combines a "secular" political system with a tolerant strand of Sunni Islam. The reality, however, is difficult to get a handle on because Turkish Islam is very diverse and the state actively represses and controls religious life (Ref B). (Note: Many Turks object to the "moderate Islam" label for a variety of reasons (Ref C). End Note.)

[1](#)4. (C) The Turkish state claims that Turkish Islam is unified, tolerant, and peace-loving. Turkish officials note that 98 percent of citizens of Turkey are Muslim and they claim that the small (non-Muslim) minority religious communities are free to practice their faiths. The majority of Turks subscribe to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. The Hanafi school is one of the more open-minded and tolerant strands of Sunni Islam.

[1](#)5. (C) The reality is more complex. Turkish Islam is far from unified. About 10-15 percent of Turkey's 70 million people are Alevis (heterodox Muslim). The Sunni community is divided into a variety of lodges, brotherhoods, and religious communities, e.g. Gulenists, Nurettin, National View, Naksibendis, and Suleymaniye. These groups have a variety of views and practices and some are involved in extensive business, educational, and political activities.

[1](#)6. (C) Violent Turkish Islamic extremism does exist. Turkish Hizbollah and the Great Eastern Islamic Raider-Front (IBDA-C) have conducted a number of terrorist attacks over the years. According to press reports, around 500 Turks served with Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan. IBDA-C members cooperated with Al Qaida to conduct the 2003 Istanbul bombings against two synagogues, an HSBC bank, and the British consulate.

[1](#)7. (C) It is difficult to assess exactly how widespread Islamic extremism extends in Turkey because the Turkish state actively monitors and represses religious expression (Ref D). The Turkish state hires and trains all religious officials (imams and muftis); appoints them to their posts; and pays their salaries. The state writes the sermons that most of the imams deliver at Friday prayers; picks which imam in each mosque gets to deliver the Friday sermon; and uses undercover intelligence officials to monitor their activities. State funds are used to construct mosques, but the state spends no money on Alevi houses of worship, Jewish synagogues, or Christian churches. All Muslim school age students are required to take classes in the Hanafi-Sunni tradition of Islam, regardless of their personal sectarian beliefs. Non-Muslim students are not required to take these courses, but alternative courses are not offered by the state. Private religious classes are illegal and proselytizing by non-Muslims, while not illegal, is viewed with great suspicion and actively discouraged. Pious girls and women are officially not allowed to wear headscarves in schools and universities, or in state workplaces.

[1](#)8. (C) Embassy contacts have consistently claimed that only a tiny minority of Turkish citizens subscribe to extreme, radical, or violent forms of Islam. A leading Turkish

national security analyst estimates that only about 7 percent of Turkish citizens endorse radical forms of Islam. Ibrahim Uslu, the general manager of ANAR (the governing Justice and Development Party,s (AKP) polling firm) claims that only around 5 percent of Turks are radical Islamist. In a country of nearly 70 million people, however, there would be over 350,000 potential terrorists if only one half of one percent of the population supported Al Qaida-like terrorism.

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WHAT AKP LEADERS SAY (AND THINK) ABOUT ISLAM AND TOLERANCE  
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19. (C) The Turkish constitution and party law bans parties formed around sectarianism, ethnicity, regionalism, or opposition to the "secular" constitutional system. AKP is officially a "secular" political party. Nonetheless, AKP is an Islam-oriented political party. The leaders and grassroots members of AKP largely come from the Refah and Fazilet parties, banned for Islamic extremism in 1998 and 2001 respectively.

110. (C) In general, AKP,s senior leaders make constructive statements in public about the importance of religious tolerance. In a 1 May 2005 speech, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gul called for tolerance and moderation by stating that, "It is, therefore, of great importance that based on the fundamental principles of the Islamic tradition, such as tolerance and moderation, we take an open-minded, realistic but equally visionary approach." In recent public statements PM Erdogan and State Minister (for religious affairs) Mehmet Aydin made statements criticizing generally the state of the Islamic world and stressing the importance of religious tolerance and human rights (Ref E).

111. (C) The AKP government, however, also backed a sermon delivered at Friday prayers in mosques around Turkey in May 2005 that stated that unspecified foreign powers were using Christian missionaries to undermine Islam (Ref F). State Minister Aydin repeated these points by releasing a statement labeling missionary activities in Turkey "separatist and destructive" and implying that missionaries are part of an organized effort by foreign governments to create divisions in the country (Ref G). Aydin was unhelpful when the Charge d'Affaires recently tried to discuss this issue with him during a courtesy call (Ref H), and never responded to Ambassador Edelman,s request to pay a joint visit to a Protestant church after it was firebombed earlier this year.

112. (C) A variety of Embassy contacts assert that AKP,s senior leadership does not really believe in religious tolerance, but merely pretends to support tolerance in an effort to court Western favor and promote Turkey,s EU membership bid. AKP,s leaders, especially PM Erdogan, have repeatedly rejected the notion of "Islamic terrorism." Many secular Turks have tried to convince us that AKP leaders are practicing a form of lying or dissembling that is ethically permissible if intended to protect or advance the cause of Islam.

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MISSION TURKEY,S PROGRAMS IN COMBATING EXTREMISM  
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113. (C) The Mission organizes public diplomacy programming that supports MPP goals and also addresses extremist trends in segments of Turkish society. Our goal is not to target extremists specifically, but to introduce a broad audience -- many of whom have never met an American -- to our society, culture, and politics. To this end, we have opened up new religiously oriented institutional contacts, including universities. Another opportunity has opened up with NGOs, a sector that is growing dramatically in Turkey, especially with Islam-oriented Turks who do not participate in many civil society organizations due to customs and culture. By bringing in speakers on the nuts and bolts of NGO organization or sending Islam-oriented NGO members on International Visitor programs, we have found a very receptive audience.

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REACHING OUT TO ISLAM-ORIENTED JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES  
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114. (C) The Mission has made a concerted effort to include editors and correspondents from Islam-oriented newspapers in press roundtables with the Ambassador and Mission officials and representational events. We have targeted responsible journalists from Islam-oriented newspaper for International Visitor programs. The Mission has worked hard to reach a broad audience through existing contacts, opinion leaders from outside the major cities, and Islam-oriented Turks.

¶15. (C) Mission officers, of course, meet frequently with members of the governing and Islam-influenced AKP to discuss US-Turkish relations and a variety of other issues. PolOffs have also met with members from Turkey,s smaller and more radical Islam-oriented political parties (i.e. Saadet Party and Grand Unity Party). These meetings -- in parliament (with AKP members), party headquarters in Ankara, and in regional party offices around the country -- have been very helpful in allowing Mission Turkey to directly communicate with religious and pious Turks about U.S. foreign policy, American values, and the importance of U.S.-Turkish cooperation. Results have been mixed. Some interlocutors listen carefully and appear to take some of our points, but others are obviously skeptical about U.S. policies and motives; prone to conspiracy theory thinking; and clearly influenced by Islamist-oriented media. However, in this sense they are no different from other Turks, who are equally prone to other conspiracy theories.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS  
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¶16. (U) Mission-organized English language teaching programs in Turkey provide abundant opportunities to introduce civic education and to open the Turkish educational system to Western-oriented educational practices and concepts such as critical thinking, student-centered classrooms, team-building, and conflict resolution. The placement of American English Language Fellows in university ELT and English departments and at military service academies has provided critical exposure to American culture and values. Placements have included universities in the conservative cities of Konya, Trabzon, Gaziantep, and Erzurum.

¶17. (U) English Language Fellows are often the only Americans young people in some communities have an opportunity to get to know. After attending prayer services with a group of conservative female students at one of the oldest mosques in the city center, a Fellow in Erzurum spent the afternoon discussing the similarities between Christianity and Islam in English. The students noted her appreciation of their way of life and received an extra English lesson using content-specific language skills that they might never have heard in the classroom.

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EDUCATIONAL AND EXCHANGE PROGRAMS  
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¶18. (U) The ACCESS micro-scholarship program provides direct English-language instruction by the Fellows to underprivileged high school students who cannot afford to take private courses. All ten of the FY-06 English Language Fellows, who are placed in cities around Turkey, will participate in the ACCESS program, which will reach 300 students.

¶19. (U) International Visitor (IV) Program and other short-term exchanges involve participation by professionals in all fields from throughout Turkey as well as government officials at all levels. Participants consistently report that they were particularly impressed with the interaction and relationship between government and citizenry in the United States and the impact of individual initiative. Turks regularly participate in projects related to the judiciary, anti-terrorism, democracy, and diversity and tolerance in a multi-ethnic society.

¶20. (U) The Fulbright Program, active in Turkey since 1951, encompasses scholarly exchanges at all levels and is the Department,s premier educational exchange program. The Turkish Fulbright program has tripled in size over the last two years and in FY-06 will receive more USG funding than any other Fulbright program in the world. After a concerted effort to diversify the program and reach under-represented universities, geographic regions and students from a wide range of backgrounds, more than 400 applications were received from fifty-nine of Turkey,s seventy-three public and private universities. Almost two-thirds of them came from women (240 women; 164 men) and one-quarter from universities outside of Istanbul and Ankara. Up to seventy new fellowships to study in the United States will be offered to Turkish graduate students for the academic year 2006-07.

¶21. (U) The Embassy supports the annual American Studies Association of Turkey conference and organizes seminars on resources for teaching about the U.S. in order to strengthen teaching about the United States at Turkish universities and increase understanding of U.S. society and values.

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GUEST SPEAKERS AND ARTS PROGRAMING  
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¶22. (U) Mission-organized speaker programs address all our MPP themes and in the past two years have included presentations by Thomas Friedman on U.S. policy in Iraq (December 2003); Bruce Hoffman, RAND Washington on terrorism (March 2004); Walter Russell Mead, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, on U.S. foreign policy (April 2004); Omar Khalidi, Aga Khan Program at MIT, on Islamic architecture and mosque design in the U.S. (April 2004); speakers on the U.S. presidential election; Max Boot, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, on U.S. foreign policy (December 2004); historian James Caesar on anti-Americanism (March 2005); and Rudolph Vecoli on U.S. immigration policy (May 2005).

¶23. (U) The Harlem Boys Choir, which gave two concerts in Ankara in April 2005 to standing-room only audiences totaling more than 2,000, generated extensive positive press coverage that lauded the Harlem Boys Choir performances and the multi-cultural nature of American society.

¶24. (U) The Department's support for the Istanbul Biennial September-November 2005 included public education programs that took U.S. artists and art critics to the conservative southeastern Anatolian city of Diyarbakir, where they engaged in lively discussions with audiences on how art biennials serve as a generator of ideas. They gave detailed information about their works in this context and presented examples from other international exhibitions. Their outreach was particularly directed toward children and young people, and the interactive nature of the program allowed local people to be informed about the arts in the U.S. and to interact personally with U.S. artists.

¶25. (U) Embassy Ankara joined forces with Consulate Adana to mount a photographic exhibition on religious diversity in the conservative southeastern Anatolian city of Gaziantep in a June 2005. The exhibition of forty-four photographs celebrating the diversity of religious belief in Anatolia feature the work of a prominent Adana-based amateur photographer whose photographs covered multi-faith subjects. Co-sponsored by the Consulate in Adana, the Gaziantep American Corner, the Gaziantep Rotary Club, and the Anatolian Journalists Union, the exhibition was opened on the same day as the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and Intolerance.

¶26. (C) Comment: Turkey's reputation as a moderate, tolerant, and secular country is due in large measure to the oppressive and authoritarian manner in which the State monitors and controls religion. It is difficult to target "extremists" because the State has actively repressed "extremists" and driven almost all unofficial expressions of Islam underground. As Turkey goes down the road towards the EU, the reform process will require the country to liberalize some aspects of the regime that control religious expression. This could result in an increased degree of Islamic extremism. But if Turkey is to live up to its reputation for being a moderate, tolerant, and truly secular country, then it will have to open up and confront the hidden and potentially unpleasant realities of some aspects of Islamic belief and practice in Turkey. End Comment.

MCELDOWNEY